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MEANING, MEANINGFULNESS AND ASSOCIATION IN THE CONTEXT OF LANGUAGE TEACHING MEDIA.

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THE AUTHOR'S POSITION WAS THAT, BECAUSE PEOPLE OFTEN DIFFER IN THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF THE MEANING OF WORDS, LINGUISTS MUST WORK WITH PSYCHOLOGISTS, NEUROLOGISTS, AND OTHERS TO GUIDE LANGUAGE TEACHERS IN THEIR KNOWLEDGE OF HOW A LANGUAGE WORKS AND HOW BEST TO COMMUNICATE THIS KNOWLEDGE TO THEIR STUDENTS. WHILE DENOTATIVE MEANING REFERS PRIMARILY TO VISUAL AND FACTUAL EFFECTS, CONNOTATIVE MEANING IS LINKED TO EMOTION, MAKING IT IMPERATIVE FOR THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHER TO BE STEEPED IN THE SOCIAL-CULTURAL ATMOSPHERE OF THE COUNTRY WHOSE LANGUAGE HE IS TEACHING IN ORDER TO CREATE IN HIS STUDENTS AN AWARENESS OF VERBAL CONTEXT SIMILAR TO THAT OF NATIVES OF THE FOREIGN COUNTRY. THIS ARTICLE IS A REPRINT FROM "PRAXIS DES NEUSPRACHLICHEN UNTERRICHTS," NUMBER 2, 1966. (GJ)

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Of all the imps which inhabit the nervous system the one we call "meaning" is held by common consent to be the most elusive. Yet, equally by common consent among social scientists, this variable is one of the fundamental and most dynamic determinants of human behaviour.

One of the most solidly established facts about verbal behaviour is that speed of acquisition and level of performance depend on the characteristics of the stimulus material meant to be memorized. Since the learner of a foreign language does not learn the new tongue under the same conditions as the baby learning its mother tongue motivation in visual, auditive or printed stimulus material is, of course, very closely allied to meaning and meaningfulness of such material. Work done by Hull (1940), Brixton (1943) and Noble (1950) indicates that meaningfulness offsets the development of habit interference and consequently strengthens memory trace, and we have found that meaningful visual stimulus material strengthens both short and long term memory trace to quite a marked degree. The basic problem to the researcher in instructional materials as well as to the teacher is to make sure that what is meaningful to him is equally so to the recipient of the stimulus, that is to the pupil. That this is frequently not the case is a fact, and we must look for the causes of this phenomenon. I suggest that many of the misunderstandings and the not infrequent lack of meaningfulness to the student of language content presented to him stem in a large measure from two facts. One is the complexity of word recognition, and the second is the insufficiently clear realization that speech is a three term relationship. – The word according to Charcot (1887) is composed of four fundamental elements, an auditory image, a visual image and two motor images, one articulatory and the other graphic. – The three term relationship making for speech is the psychological, the physiological and the anatomical. – With regard to the four elements making up the word Charcot stated that there may be an amnesia for any one of these or even a combination of them. We shall have to find out more about how such defects in memory trace arise considering the fact that various groups of word images do *not* have their seat in certain localized regions of the brain.

With regard to the tremendous complexity involving speech we must remember that in the three term relationship the physiological processes attendant upon speech production extend over wide areas of the nervous system, are of an extremely intricate nature in themselves, and always involve time as a factor in their description.

As regards the facilitating and speeding effect of meaningfulness, English scholars, shortly after the beginning of the last war, sought for an explanation among the laws of learning and transfer. Already in 1915 we were told by Titchener: "If the translation out of common sense into science is to be made at all, psychology is the science in which the equivalent of meaning will be found", and Boring, some years later, explained: "It takes two mental processes to make a meaning. When a sensation or image accrues (is added to) to a sensation or image, one has a meaning in the form of a perception or an idea. A meaning is a relation." Carrying this interpretation further James (1892) established the principle of multiple associations: "The more other facts a fact is associated with in the mind, the better possession of it our memory retains. Each of its associates becomes a hook on which it hangs, a means to fish it up by when sunk beneath the surface. The secret of a good memory is thus the secret of forming diverse and multiple meaningful associations with every fact we care to retain." – The emphasis here is on the connotative rather

than the denotative properties of meaning. A word connects all the attributes which are not denoted but which we associated with it. – So it will be logical for me to say that a word having many connotations is more meaningful than one having few, and connotations are the linguistic equivalents of associations. "Thus the word pig denotes a young swine of either sex. It connotes filth, gluttony, high pitched squealing, the little pig that went to market, various characters in literature who have gone by that nickname, and whatever else, apart from its basic denotation, this word may conjure up in the mind of one who hears or reads it." (Evans and Evans 1957)

The word "sun" had the following immediate noun connotations for a class of 12 year old boys (average I. Q. 80): "Warmth, heat, loveliness, light, happiness, laziness, gaiety, dryness, joy, love, preciousness, drought, action, laughter"; the word "prisoner" was associated immediately with: "Dungeon, escape, punishment, sorrow, pity, harshness, horror." Hitler, in his last speech in the German Reichstag in 1944, called our then Foreign Secretary: „Eden, dieser parfümierte Bengel." The word „Bengel" could be translated into rude, clumsy fellow, urchin, silly fool, boor and clown. None of these meanings give the precise pejorative, derogatory and nasty connotation tied to the German word „Bengel", as used in this instance.

Let us look for a few minutes at an experiment conducted in a German junior school a fortnight prior to the Queen's visit to Germany. In 4 classes of 30 children, aged between 6–10 years, the teachers wrote on the board "the Queen", and asked the children to describe her, and to say briefly how she spends her day. The subject was *not* in any way discussed but the interest was naturally intense. The word "Queen" evoked a wide variety of responses and associations. Here are some: "The Queen reigns; she always sits on her throne", is one terse comment. Another little girl is slightly more informative: "The Queen must reign in peace: she must tell the cook what to cook and she must send her servants to do her shopping." A seven year old boy commits himself to the mere fact that "the Queen must be very careful that war does not start." One seven year old girl ties different associations to the word "Queen": "Her Majesty only wears dresses of gold and silver and the most costly precious stones." One six year old girl, who had previously seen the Queen on a television news item, writes in complete disillusionment: "When I saw the Queen on the screen I asked myself whether this was indeed a queen, because I knew from fairy tales and story books that queens always wear long, purple gowns and cloaks." One seven year old boy, obviously thinking of Xmas informs us: "Her Majesty will soon arrive in Munich, hung with gold and silver tinsel." One eight year old lad, who clearly has this problem very much on his mind, writes: "I find that it behoves a queen to get up at six o'clock in the morning." – Another young lad, also preoccupied with early morning says: "The personal maid of Her Majesty immediately enters to inquire which dress she is to lay out and then brings this dress at once into the Queen's bedroom which she immediately leaves again, so that her Majesty can wash." Little Rudi Jatzk is concerned over the Queen's health and writes: "She must be sure to have many cushions on her throne so as not to catch severe rheumatism." Her Majesty's meals are a natural source of conjecture: "for breakfast of course only black bread and honey, perhaps some fruit". "When Her Majesty returns from her daily drive, well-aired, she will, of course, always eat her favourite luncheon dish, a chicken, five or six potatoes and many salads." One sensitive lad sees the Queen "regularly travelling through her country to look after the poor and the sick", while one little girl informs us that the Queen "will order about her servants but does no work herself". One romantic little soul writes: "When it rains, the Queen reads a book by her grand piano. She sings songs too, and picks

flowers, and at night she loves to go dancing." On the question of what the Queen does a number of children comment with what she may and may not do: ... "she may drive a car, she may have a long lie in in the morning, she may go for a walk." But seven year old Richard Siglreitmaier clearly lies at Her Majesty's feet, for he writes: "In her magnificence she shines like a thousand snow-white Xmas bells." You will see from these few examples how motivation has activated a train of associations, which an able teacher, dealing with uncorrupted and often highly imaginative little minds may turn to such advantage as to make a memorable experience of his treatment of the subject.

We are here not dealing with language as a form of human behaviour in the Skinnerian sense. Skinner says of verbal behaviour that "we have no reason to assume that verbal behaviour differs in any fundamental respect from non-verbal behaviour" (1957). Skinner's theory is opposed by those psychologists and teachers who maintain that it is the word which has made men of us, because it is through the word man has achieved a new type of neural activity – abstraction. The opponents of the behaviourist school believe that "speech restructures the cognitive processes of man, enabling him to get a profound orientation in surrounding reality. In analysing the nature of language and of 'parole' the neo-behaviourists would allow place for mediational and emotional processes – not directly observable, but which may be inferred from word manifestation. Because of this active and directive role of speech, conditioning in men is quite a different process from conditioning of animal behaviour" (1959), and in the teaching of modern languages, certainly during the first three to four years, it is, of course, the visual element within the system of language teaching media which has the role of mediator, of conditioner and reinforcer and as conveyor of meaning to a marked degree, if we use such materials meaningfully. – It is not fully true, as Hjelmslev (1961) said, that "in absolute isolation no sign has any meaning". If I begin a sentence with the words "I will ...", you do not know at this stage what the word "will" means exactly. I might continue, "I will probably operate at nine o'clock", or I might begin a sentence with "the right" and continue "the right hand road is the one you want", as opposed to the left, or I might say "the right way to set about this job ...", in which case the meaning of the word "right" is "correct". Thus the meaning of the word "right" is in a state of suspense until it is determined by words which are heard later. But even in isolation a very large number of words (signs), which do exist as a reality, since they have been created by man, cannot be dissociated from meaning, and since signs hardly ever exist in complete isolation Hjelmslev's statement would appear of limited validity only. Meaning is determined by verbal context. Words derive their meaning also from another kind of context, a context of interest, a term which includes attention to an object in the environment, or an idea, together with the feelings and intentions of the speaker and hearer with regard to it.

Consider the five words "Will you take the chair?". What this sentence means can be decided only in relation to the context. It might mean, "Will you preside at the meeting?" or, "Will you sit on the only chair in the room?" or, "Will you remove the chair?" or, "Will you accept the professorial appointment?". We see in this example that the context of interest not only determines the meaning of the word "chair", but this in turn determines the meaning of the word "take". These are psychological facts, but they imply physiological correlates. We can now readily appreciate what Fries (1954) means when he says "linguistic meaning without social-cultural meaning constitutes mere verbalism." Hill (1958) says "every language is a model of a culture and of its adjustment to the world", and if our students are to be able to use the foreign language to express their personal meaning in a way which will be

fully comprehensible to a native speaker, they must penetrate into this area of social convention in the use of words, tone of voice, music of the language. The student, in order to savour fully the subtleties of meaning of language as used in "parole" by the foreign speaker, must relive that language as "a perfect symbolism of experience". As Sapir (Berkeley, 1958) most truly stated: "No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality." I would say that a really determined attempt on the part of the learner to steep himself in the social-cultural atmosphere of the country whose tongue he is learning may lead him to a sophisticated degree of awareness and feeling for that tongue very much akin to Alice's feeling when reading this strange little poem in Lewis Carroll's Jabberwocky (Alice in "Through the Looking-Glass"):

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves
And the mome raths outgrabe.

In this poem Lewis Carroll is using "mots grammaticaux" grouped as real structures, but he inserts non-sense roots, so that the result is precisely that felt by Alice, who declared: "Somehow is seems to fill my head with ideas – only I don't exactly know what they are!" This comprehension on a structural level but non-comprehension on a semantic level making for "meaningful nonsense" would, in the case of a foreign student of English, indeed indicate the sine qua non of a fine linguist: „Sprachgefühl".

If we read that "In a Welsh yard the wheels of an old express engine are methodically dismembered in the brutal and final indignity of the scrap-heap", we may agree that the impact, the meaningfulness of this sentence is considerable, but I venture to suggest that only a pictorial representation showing the actual dismembering, the tearing apart of the iron horse's limbs against the bleak and cruel background of a scrap-yard will drive home to us, in conjunction with the printed words describing the action, the obscenity of the image. Here we have a perfect example of increase in meaningfulness through the powerful reinforcement of the printed word by the visual dimension. This picture, to me, recalls Baudelaire's "La charogne". I merely mention this because from the point of view of profound understanding, Baudelaire's "... les couleurs, les parfums et les sons se confondent" would indeed apply to a pictorial representation of the dismemberment of the old express engine, for a careful study of such a photograph or painting would be fully meaningful only if the visual impact were associated with the colours of steel and iron being burned into submission and destruction, with the smell of oil and grease and grime and metal tortured by fire, and with the relentless hissing sound of the acetylene torch and the hammer blows wreaking death in this abattoir of "condemned" locomotives.

We are told by Strevens (1964) that in the study of linguistic form and especially of grammar, linguistics is much more advanced than in the study of context. Context corresponds here roughly to meaning. Strevens informs us that "it is more fruitful to identify the unit clause, the element of structure subject, or the class noun from *within* the language itself, rather than by reference to external contextual meaning", and that subsequently we speak about the contextual meanings of these categories.

I would not quarrel with this statement, as long as we accept the fact that meaning inherent in the connotative and associationistic aspect of a verbal unit, be it a word or a sentence, is recognized as a most powerful motivational, memory-reinforcing and organizing factor within the classroom learning situation, and this applies equally to the mother tongue and second language.

We may say then that the language teacher must constantly be aware of the fact that linguistics, which is a description of the way language works, ... and the way how best to pass on language to his students ... are two approaches which interconnect. In exposing his pupils to language, this tool of extreme power and beauty, in all its dimensions, the teacher ought to be able to instil in his students a curiosity and respect for its form, particularly in this technological age, and he ought to be able to fire a good many of his charges with an enthusiasm and a sensitivity for contextual meaningfulness. I believe that the latter aim, even in this age of programming, will continue to be both an easier and the more important task, ... more important because I believe that it will fall to the language teacher above all, by way of a broader duty, to help build a new humanism. This humanism will have to include in its philosophy the findings of modern science, but it will have to be a humanism which, in this age of mushrooming scientific resources, must be able to shield man from becoming "homo mecanicus".

I have used the words "obscene" and "abattoir" in connection with the scrapping of railway engines; the French, particularly the Burgundian, would say: «Boire de l'eau, c'est une obscénité.» In this land of the grape, water is scorned with more than the normal French disdain. You may recall the Frenchman who stated with finality that he never allowed water to touch his lips. Someone asked him: "What do you do about brushing your teeth, Monsieur?" The reply was immediate: «Je me sers toujours d'un vin blanc sec, très leger et peu prétentieux.» As Hill said: "Every language is a model of a culture and of its adjustment to the world."

Earlier I had already spoken of the connotative and denotative meaning of a word. We know that the connotative meaning of a word contains a large element of emotion, whereas the denotation meaning refers particularly to visual and factual effects. As Sapir (1958) has acutely observed: "It is because it is learned early and piecemeal in constant association with the colour and the requirements of actual context that language, in spite of its quasi-mathematical form, is rarely a purely referential organisation." The word «escargot» to a Frenchman means the satisfaction of a particularly good dinner, perhaps the associated pleasures of dining out. Translated as "snail", it means to an Anglo-Saxon a slimy creature to be avoided, to be crushed or poisoned in order to protect the vegetable garden. In his book "The Silent Language" Edward Hall (1959) says: "We must never assume that we are fully *aware* of what we communicate to someone else. There exist in the world today tremendous distortions in meaning as people try to communicate with one another." – This problem of being aware of the "meaning" we are arousing when we use the foreign tongue, is problem enough in one's mother tongue. Why otherwise the often heard expression, "So that's what you meant!" In his endeavour to make his students aware of the "meanings" words have for the native speaker, the foreign language teacher will have to bear in mind four behavioural relations of signs; they are the representing relation, the mediating relation, the emphatic relation and the communicating relation.

1. The representing relation is the one that exists between signs and their referents. We note, for example, the different sensory categorization implied by "parfum" and "perfume". The "parfum" of ice-cream does not fit into the English category.
2. The mediating relation is that between the self-stimulation and the overt response. At the sound of his own voice saying «Bonjour, monsieur», the Frenchman automatically extends his hand.
3. The emphatic relation refers to the relation between the response made to a sign and that made to the object represented. This relation may vary. In certain

contexts the word "apple" may arouse the same mouth-watering reactions as the sight of the fruit itself. A Frenchman may have feeling of complete indifference to camels, yet react violently if someone says to him, «chameau!»

4. The communicating relation finds its expression in the acceptable vocabulary and structure of the language, which the foreigner must learn to handle in the same way as the native speaker if he is to convey the "meaning" he intends.

The foreign language teacher must be conscious of the existence of these four relations (Osgood 1953) if he is to do justice to "meaning" in the foreign tongue as well as to basic structural skills. Such a consciousness can only come through long study and close association with the culture of the foreign country whose language is being learned, and ideally through active participation in the life of the foreign community. While this is an impossibility for most learners the resourceful teacher will recreate many of those situations his students would find themselves in if they were learning the language within the foreign community. In doing so he will employ every means within the growing and increasingly effective system of modern language teaching aids. In presenting his materials aimed at giving a better and deeper understanding of the patterns of life of the people whose language is being learned the language teacher will be careful to avoid presenting the students with the stereotype of the target nation. He will avoid a situation continuing to exist in which the word «Français» is associated by his students with being "less intelligent, less thoughtful, less honest, less generous, less dependable, less kind, less stable and having less character than an English-speaking person". It is not so very many years ago that "Punch" carried a cartoon of two navvies looking at a gentleman sporting an elegant little goatee, walking down Regent Street, and one saying to the other: "Look at that Froggy, let's heave half a brick at him!"

In this world of ours, which is growing smaller year by year due to the astonishing advances in communications technology, we simply must try to overcome the formidable and often infuriating distortions in meaning as man tries to communicate with man. The task of achieving further understanding and insight into the mental processes allied to verbal behaviour of man must be one of our top priorities in the immediate future, in both our own interest and that of generations to come.

If language teachers, material investigators and creators, linguistic scientists, neurologists, psychologists and physiologists will work together – in complete academic freedom – towards a truly better understanding of man – then language, constant companion to all human behaviour, may yet become as ennobling a factor of our existence as is reason.

GERALD FLEMING

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Would you have marked it wrong?

The candidate wrote:	The examiner corrected:
1. Customs *have* to be paid on foreign goods.	. . . *has* . . .
2. Is it possible that he *can* be a German?	. . . he *may be* . . .
3. When did you see him last? – I *have seen* him this morning.	I *saw* him . . .
4. She began to laugh when he *detailed her his plan.*	She began to laugh when he *detailed his plan to her.*
5. He *made* a hasty decision.	. . . *took* . . .

Die Besprechung der einzelnen Punkte erscheint auf Seite 209.

È corretto?

1. Lo saluto, signor Marco!
   ArrivederLo, signor Bianchi!
2. Te sei veramente furbo
   Il padrone sono me
3. Se lo vedrei, gli direi tutto
4. Me lo ha (l'ha) imparato un amico
   me l'ho imparato da molto tempo
   dove hai imparato queste cose?
5. Questa stoffa è assai migliore di quella
   questa stoffa è più migliore di quella
6. Nel contempo mi mandò una lettera da Torino
7. Mi dà (mi mette addosso) il nervoso
8. La ringrazio assai! Non c'è di che!
9. Si fermò una settimana da noi
   si trattenne una settimana da noi
10. Non ho né la voglia né il tempo
    non ho nè la voglia nè il tempo

Die Besprechung der einzelnen Punkte erscheint auf Seite 210.